

PETER AND THREE MIRACLES ACTS 9:2-43

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

When I was in college, I had a friend named Al who was blind. Al lived on my floor in the dorm for the first three years of my time in college. Then in our last year he and I and four other Christians lived together in a house off campus. In Al's second or third year another Christian guy became convinced as a result of his study of the Bible that Al could be, and should be, healed of his blindness. Al was willing to try anything within reason. So he went up to this other guy's room a couple of times, and this Christian prayed over him fervently, asking the Lord to heal him of his blindness.

The last time that I heard about Al he was still blind. Was the failure to be healed due to a lack of faith in Al? Was it due to a lack of faith in the other Christian? Was there a lack of understanding about the proper way to go about it? Or was healing simply contrary to God's sovereign plan for Al's life?

Many of us have sought divine intervention for the various physical ailments with which we and our loved ones have suffered. A few of us have seen, once or twice or perhaps a few times, miraculous answers to those prayers. But most of us most of the time, I suspect, have not seen instantaneous, miraculous healing. Why?

Miraculous things happen in the Bible. In our current study of the Book of Acts we have seen healings and other miracles happen a number of times in the early church. Why don't such miracles happen more often today? Does the church just not know how to cause them to happen? Do we lack faith? Hopefully we can get some answers today as a result of our study, and hopefully we will get a better sense about how the miraculous relates to God's sovereign plan for our world.

We have seen in recent weeks that the stage is being set in early church history for the expansion of the gospel to Gentile people. Jesus told His disciples to bring the good news about Him to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and ultimately to the ends of the earth. At this point in our sermon series the Christian message has been brought to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria. For it to break into more remote places, the Jewish Christians are going to have to preach to Gentiles.

We have seen the last couple of times that the Lord was raising up Paul to be a key leader in bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. But the Lord Jesus Christ is going to cause Peter to be the first one to make a breakthrough with the Gentiles. Today we are going to see how the Lord sets that up.

I.

In vv. 32-35 we are going to encounter the FIRST MIRACLE. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. MIRACLE ONE: A PARALYZED MAN IS HEALED) In this miracle A PARALYZED MAN IS HEALED. According to v. 32 of Acts #9, **“Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda.”** Lydda was located about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem. (LYDDA JOPPA MAP) Today it is part of the modern city of Lod. On the northern edge of the city is Ben Gurion Airport, Israel’s international airport. Lydda was at the intersection of two main roads. One road went from Egypt up to Syria. The other went from Joppa to Jerusalem.

When we last saw Peter, he had returned to Jerusalem with John after laying his hands upon the Samaritan Christians and seeing the Holy Spirit come upon them. In v. 31 we saw last week that the church enjoyed a period of peace at this time.

(OVERHEAD OFF) With less strenuous opposition to the gospel for the moment Peter apparently began to visit the new groups of Christians that had sprung up in Judea. My guess is that the other apostles were doing the same kind of thing. Luke singled out Peter for detailed mention because he was the leader among the apostles and because he was the one who was going to make the breakthrough with the Gentiles. Peter had been given the keys to the kingdom of heaven by Jesus. Soon he was going to be opening up the door to the Gentiles.

So at Lydda Peter found a group of believers. This little church may have been started by Jewish Christians who had been forced out of Jerusalem by the persecution that followed Stephen’s death and/or it may have been started by Philip, who had been in this general vicinity a bit earlier. Peter now found a paralyzed man there.

Luke tells us in v. 33, **“There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed.”** Notice that it doesn’t say that Aeneas was a Christian. In the miracle story that follows right after this, Luke mentions in v. 36 that the woman helped by Peter is a disciple. No such claim is made by Luke, although it is possible that he is intended to be included among the saints mentioned in v. 32. Earlier, in #3, we saw that the lame man whom Peter and John healed was not a believer in the risen Christ. According to the gospel records Jesus healed several people who did not know who He was.

Luke doesn’t tell us very much about the circumstances of this man’s healing or how much he knew about Jesus. According to v. 34, **“And Peter said to him, ‘Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed.’ And immediately he rose.”** The abruptness and the immediacy of this healing are similar to the circumstances involving the lame man in the temple in Acts #3. This crippled man did not have much time to think about what was going on. The impression I get is that he was healed apart from any faith within him. Peter told him that he was healed. He didn’t put any conditions on the guy at all. He didn’t say that he had to believe anything. He didn’t have to make a contribution to his ministry. He simply told the man that his healing was an accomplished fact. Peter told the man to get up, and he did.

By the way, parents and grandparents, if you ever have trouble getting your kids to make their beds, here's a proof text that you can use. If they want to know why they should make their bed, you can tell them that the Bible commands it in Acts 9:34: **"Arise, and make your bed."** It's a little out of context, but maybe it will help.

(OVERHEAD ON--- SHARON PLAIN) Verse 35 says, **"And all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord."** Sharon was the name of the plain that stretched along the coast by Lydda and Joppa. It was about ten miles wide and fifty miles long. So clearly this miracle had a positive impact for the gospel. A lot of people became Christians.

Some Christians look at passages like this and say that this kind of thing should be happening today. The modern church is just not doing what it ought to be doing. We need to step out in faith. We need to claim the promises that God has given to us in His Word. Kenneth Copeland (KENNETH COPELAND), a pastor from Oklahoma with a writing ministry and a radio ministry and a TV ministry, says to Christians, **"Healing belongs to you. Jesus purchased it by going to the cross. You have just as much right to be healed as you do to be saved..."** (www.kcm.org/studycenter, "Welcome to the Family")

Wife Gloria (GLORIA COPELAND) explains, **"You can receive your healing by faith. God ordained it. Jesus paid for it. Now it's time for you to get to it."** (www.kcm.org. "Receive Your Healing by Faith") The problem with my blind friend Al, according to them, is just a lack of faith. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In the context of our study of Acts one immediate objection we might raise to this is that the specific examples of physical healing here have involved some unbelievers, at least the guy in Acts #3. How can we say that faith is the requirement for physical healing?

From a broader perspective it is important to keep in mind that in Biblical history there have only been a few times when there have been major outbreaks of miraculous activities, and there have only been a few people who have had special abilities to perform such miracles. At the time of the Exodus Moses performed miracles. The prophet Elijah and his successor Elisha had miraculous powers at their disposal. Jesus and His apostles also performed mighty works in the first century. Then in the future, immediately before the return of Jesus, there are indications that there will be another outbreak of the miraculous. There were miracles that happened occasionally at other times. But these are the only periods in history when miraculous activity was a frequent phenomenon.

Paul spoke about a spiritual gift of healing in the Book of First Corinthians. Most, if not all, of the apostles seemed to have it. Other Christians in the early church apparently had this gift. But by the end of the first century the signs and wonders and miraculous spiritual gifts seem to have died out.

In the second chapter of the Book of Hebrews (PROJECTOR ON--- HEBREWS 2:3) the author says, “... **how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, (HEBREWS 3:4) while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.**” The clear implication is that the signs and wonders were no longer around when the author was writing these words.

Such power for healing resident in certain individuals as it was resident in Peter is not the norm for the church. That, however, does not mean that God does not heal miraculously. He does. We probably have some testimonies to that in our own midst. But when it happens, it is the result of the prayers of God's people rather than some gift of healing resident within a particular individual. There are no guarantees of physical healing, but occasionally the Lord intervenes. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In June of 1981 Christian radio listeners began praying for Barbara Cummiskey from Wheaton, Illinois. Barbara, who was 31, had suffered from multiple sclerosis since age 15. By 1981 her condition was so serious that she could breathe only with the aid of a respirator. She was moved to a hospice where she was expected to die.

On June 7 Barbara's aunt brought her 450 cards and letters from radio listeners who said that they were praying for her. As Barbara talked to her aunt and a couple of other Christian women, she had a sudden sense that the Lord wanted her to get up and walk. She unhooked her oxygen supply and stood up. Her legs, which had become weak from lack of use, were instantly normal. She was healed instantly. Barbara went on to study to become a surgical technologist. She ended up assisting doctors in the same hospital that had treated her for her MS. (George Sweeting, *You Can Climb Higher*, p. 114)

God does heal today miraculously. But that is not the norm, even for Christians. My wife had health difficulties for most of her adult life. Lots of people prayed for her, but there was no dramatic relief. When dramatic healing does occasionally happen, it is the result of the prayers of His people and the grace of God. From what I can tell it is not the result of people gifted as the Apostle Peter was gifted, and it is not the result of following formulas that guarantee success or from having a certain amount of faith..

II.

MIRACLE TWO is described in vv. 36-42. Here we find A DEAD WOMAN IS RAISED. (OVERHEAD ON--- II. MIRACLE TWO: A DEAD...) Verse 36 says, “**Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity.**” Joppa was located on the Mediterranean Sea. (LYDDA JOPPA MAP) It was the only major natural seaport on the coast of Israel. It was about ten miles from Lydda. Today the modern city of Tel Aviv occupies the same location.

In Joppa there was a godly woman named Tabitha. Her name in both Greek and Aramaic meant “gazelle,” which was an emblem of grace and beauty. This woman was

full of good works. Living in a society without a social security system and being separated by the Christian faith from the synagogue, some widows were left without a good support system. So Tabitha was in a position where she was able to help these other women. The fact that no family of Tabitha is mentioned may mean that she, too, was a widow.

Luke adds in v. 37, **“In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room.”** Normally the bodies of the deceased in Jewish society were washed and anointed with oil and buried the same day on which the victim had died. But here they only washed Tabitha’s body and set it aside in an upper room.

Verse 38 tells us, **“Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, ‘Please come to us without delay.’”** News of Peter’s healing of Aeneas may have prompted the request for help in Joppa. It’s possible that the men had left for Lydda before Tabitha died. But even if that was the case, the fact that the Christians at Joppa didn’t anoint the body and bury it suggests that there was hope that Peter could do something about it. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The urgency of the request from the two men would make sense if Tabitha was alive but near death when they left. It is also possible that they had left after she died but feared that restoration to life would become less likely as time went by. In some strains of Jewish thinking the soul did not actually leave the body until the fourth day after death.

According to v. 39, **“So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them.”** Tabitha was not an elder or a pastor. But her ministry had a significant impact. It was probably a small church, like ours, and she was greatly missed. They wanted her back.

So we read in v. 40, **“But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, ‘Tabitha, arise.’ And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up.”** What a contrast with healers today who want an audience. Where did Peter get the idea that he could raise this woman from the dead? How did he know how to go about it?

(PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 14:12) Before His departure from the earth Jesus told His disciples, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.”** Peter remembered such statements from Jesus, and he followed the example of Jesus.

In Mark #5 we have a description of the raising from the dead of the daughter of Jairus. Jesus came to the house of the child who had died. (MARK 5:40) Beginning in v. 40 of #5 it says, **“And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the**

child was. (MARK 5:41-42A) Taking her by the hand he said to her, ‘Talitha qum,’ which means, ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise.’ And immediately the girl got up and began walking...”

In Aramaic Peter said to Tabitha, **“Tabitha, qum.” “Tabitha, arise.”** Notice how similar that command was to the command of Jesus to Jairus’ daughter: **“Talitha, qum.”** There are other similarities. Peter was following the pattern of Jesus. The key difference is that Peter prayed. Jesus simply commanded the girl to arise.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

In v. 41 in our passage Peter raised up Tabitha and presented her alive to her Christian friends. It would be interesting to know how Tabitha felt about what happened. She had begun to enjoy the glories of heaven. Then she was called back to earth. Today what happened here might be called a Near Death Experience. I suspect that she had somewhat mixed feelings.

Verse 42 describes the reactions of others: **“And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.”** No doubt people were blown away by this rising from the dead. As with the healing of Aeneas, many came to faith in Christ as a result of this miracle.

I suspect that the other apostles also did miraculous things, maybe even bringing people back from the dead. Why did Luke choose to focus on Peter? And why did he choose to put the material here at this point in the Book of Acts? Luke and the Lord had a reason for it. Jesus had declared that the gospel was to go forth to the entire world. The early church was entirely Jewish. Jews had grown up being taught that the only way to get to God was to go through the nation of Israel. There was a good Biblical basis for that belief. Eternal salvation came only through faith in the God of Israel.

Jews also grew up being taught that Samaritans were pretty bad people and that Gentiles were unclean. It was tough for the first Jewish Christians to catch on to the idea that they had a responsibility to bring the gospel to the Samaritans and the Gentiles. Even when that began to happen and Samaritans and Gentiles began to believe in Jesus, the initial assumption was that these people had to also be united to the nation of Israel.

But when the gospel found acceptance among the Samaritans, Peter and John went to check it out. When they laid hands on these new believers, they were baptized in the Holy Spirit just as the first Christians had been on the Day of Pentecost. Miraculous phenomena accompanied that experience, showing that these Samaritan Christians truly were part of the family of God. That these people could be right with God apart from a connection with the Jewish religion was pretty radical stuff to the Jewish Christians.

The gospel is about to break out among the Gentiles. Peter in #10 is going to have the lead role in bringing that to pass. Luke here is reasserting and demonstrating Peter’s

favor and position with God. This guy who is going to bring the gospel to the Gentiles apart from their conversion to Judaism is acting in God's behalf. Anyone who can heal the sick and raise someone from the dead has to be getting his power and his directions from God. So when Peter introduces the good news about Jesus to the Gentiles and they respond apart from becoming Jews, the Jewish Christians must accept this advance of the gospel as being according to God's will.

There are only a handful of instances in all of Biblical history where individuals were raised from the dead. Abraham, David, the prophets, and the apostles of Jesus all experienced physical death and were not raised from the dead. Those few instances where God raised individuals from the dead involved crucial points in the unfolding of the plan of God for the world.

Unfortunately some people today don't understand that. In their book *We Let Our Son Die* Larry and Lucky Parker describe how they accepted the doctrine of a certain group of faith healers who said that the only issue in sickness and death is faith. They took their diabetic son off of insulin. He went into a diabetic coma and died. Instead of a funeral service they had a resurrection service, believing that God was going to raise their son from the dead. It didn't happen. Their faith was not enough. Both of the parents were tried and convicted of manslaughter and child abuse.

Apart from the use of medical means, I don't see people being raised from the dead today. That doesn't mean that it could never happen. Indeed the Book of Revelation indicates that there will be at least a couple of people miraculously raised from the dead during the period of the tribulation. But resuscitation from death should not be our expectation. Our hope should be in the resurrection from the dead, when Jesus returns to earth for His people.

III.

There is a THIRD MIRACLE contained in our passage today. In v. 43 A KOSHER JEW IS TRANSFORMED. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. MIRACLE THREE: A KOSHER...) Luke says, **"And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner."** What miracle is there in this verse? The miracle has to do with Peter staying for many days at the home of a tanner.

Tanners usually had their shops outside of town. They needed to be near a good supply of water for their work. But there was also a foul odor connected with their job. So they were zoned out of the city limits. Jews who took up the trade of tanning were confronted with a religious problem. They were always working with the bodies of animals. (LEVITICUS 11:24-25) Leviticus #11 vv. 24 & 25 say, **"And by these you shall become unclean. Whoever touches their carcass shall be unclean until the evening, and whoever carries any part of their carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening."**

So these tanners who dealt with animal bodies every day in their work were always walking around in a state of ceremonial uncleanness. According to the Mosaic Law a

state of ceremonial uncleanness meant that one could not worship at the tabernacle, and one could not worship with his fellow countrymen. (PROJECTOR OFF) Tanning was not prohibited in the Bible. There was no violation of morality involved in being a tanner. But socially and religiously this trade was not encouraged. It was classified by the rabbis as a “despised trade.”

Divorce was normally only a right that men could exercise. But rabbinic law said that a wife had the right to get a divorce if her husband was a tanner, even if she knew that he was a tanner when she got married.

I wonder if this tanner had ever been welcome in the synagogue in Joppa. Jesus had always found the warmest reception among the rejected people of society. Somehow the gospel had appealed to this man. Apparently he had been accepted among the community of Jewish Christians. Now Peter was staying at his house.

This was a rather amazing thing. We saw Peter earlier in the Book of Acts worshipping in the temple. Before the Sanhedrin he had argued that Christianity fell within the scope of traditional Judaism. Peter was recognized as the leader of the apostles. Yet now he was staying at the home of a tanner.

Peter was experiencing the miracle of a spiritual transformation. He had grown up in a Jewish culture that taught that Samaritans and Gentiles were unclean. They were bad. He had been taught in the synagogue and at home that salvation came only through the nation of Israel. When he became a follower of Jesus, he heard his master tell him and his fellow disciples initially to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Then just before His ascension into heaven Jesus told Peter and the rest to bring the gospel not only to Jerusalem and Judea but also to Samaria and the rest of the world. The apostles were not the first ones to move out to those people. The Hellenistic, or Greek-speaking Jews, were. Some of them introduced the gospel to the Samaritans. Finally Peter and John came to check that out. They introduced these Samaritan Christians to the Holy Spirit.

The Gentiles are going to receive the gospel next. But Peter needs a further transformation before he is going to be effective in that outreach. He has a few misconceptions that need to yet be removed. By virtue of his presence in the house of a tanner, we see that this transformation is under way. For Peter has learned that even unclean tanners can be full, accepted members of this new body of Christ.

To be fully useful in the kingdom of God we Christians need to overcome unbiblical prejudices that have been ingrained in us through our upbringing and our own experiences in life. Even seemingly mature Christians sometimes have unbiblical prejudices. Peter had some. It took him a while to understand that Samaritans and Gentiles and tanners could be full and equal members of the body of Christ.

Martin Luther is known as the Father of the Protestant Reformation. He was a godly man greatly used by the Lord. But even he had unbiblical prejudices. Several times in his writings he makes very negative statements about Jews as a class of people.

We can have such prejudices as well. We can have ethnic prejudices like Martin Luther had. We can have prejudices against blacks or whites or Hispanics or Italians or southerners or people from Wisconsin. Sometimes we have economic prejudices. We like to think that everybody on welfare is lazy or that everybody who makes over \$200,000 a year is selfish and greedy.

We can have religious prejudices. When I was growing up, my parents sometimes said negative things about Baptists. Notice where I am today. Some of our religious beliefs don't really have a biblical basis. Some Christians are inclined to think that all dancing is inherently evil. The Bible never says that. There are several references in the Old Testament to godly people who danced. We may come to the personal conviction that it is not best to drink alcoholic beverages. But when we become judgmental toward Christians who have a different conviction, we aren't acting on a Biblical basis. Jesus and the apostles drank wine.

Sometimes in noncharismatic churches Christians look with disdain at Christians who raise their hands in worship. That is bad, because the New Testament recognizes that as one of many valid postures of worship. To overcome such prejudices we need a spiritual transformation. We need to reexamine our thinking. We need to match up our beliefs with the Word of God. We need the Spirit of God to transform our hearts.

Physical miracles are great things. They often serve as powerful testimonies to unbelievers. But the miracle that has the most lasting impact is the miracle of spiritual transformation. For it is changed lives that most often attract unbelievers to Jesus.

Hal Lindsay's book *The Late Great Planet Earth* (PROJECTOR ON--- THE LATE GREAT PLANET EARTH) sold more copies in the decade of the 1970s than any other book except the Bible. Many people were drawn to Christ through that book. He just died last November at age 95. Hal Lindsay came from a wild background. (HAL LINDSEY) When he was in the Coast Guard, he had a friend who served with him in several ports of call. This friend joined Hal Lindsay in drinking and womanizing in New York and New Orleans and several other places.

After the Coast Guard Hal Lindsay became a riverboat captain on the Mississippi. His friend got married and settled down. The friend's wife was, or became, a Christian. One night he went with his wife to a Bible class in Dallas. He was getting pretty bored when suddenly the name of Hal Lindsay came up in the discussion. As soon as he had the opportunity, this guy went over to the person who had brought up his name. He said, **"You mentioned a fellow by the name of Hal Lindsay. Was he ever in the Coast Guard?"** **"Yes, I think so."** **"Was he ever in New Orleans? Did he ever serve as a riverboat captain?"** And he asked several other questions.

When all of his questions were answered in the affirmative, he was shocked. He said, **“If the Lord can save a person like Hal Lindsay and change him so, then He can do anything.”** Soon after that incident this man also put his faith in Christ.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

We Christians have an obligation to pray for the physical and financial and emotional needs of one another. Sometimes the Lord will answer in miraculous ways. But the greatest thing that we can do is pray for the spiritual transformation of one another. For it is lives that are transformed by the power of God that will have lasting impacts on the people around us.